

# Issues of Merit

A Publication of the Office of Policy and Evaluation, U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board

August 1997

## Director's Perspective

### A Question of Quality

Hiring a quality workforce is central to the survival of a merit system that the public trusts and that managers can rely upon. But good hires don't just happen. There has to be a commitment to excellence in the individuals we hire and in the way we go about hiring them. We have to continue to improve systems for bringing quality people into the government and matching the right people with the right jobs.

These issues have long been a concern of our office, as reflected in a number of studies we have conducted on subjects such as attracting quality applicants, bringing new hires into the government, and assessing workforce quality. And as government recruitment is increasingly decentralized and the authority to examine applicants is widely delegated to federal agencies, we'll be paying particular attention to the role that quality concerns play in these processes.

Our interest is shared by many employees, federal officials, and observers of the federal scene, some of whom have voiced an active concern about how good a workforce we really have. Recently, several public administration experts, including Constance Horner, former director of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM),

*(continued on page 2)*

### OPE Focus on the Facts

#### *Belief:*

**Because removing federal employees is so difficult, supervisors rarely fire them, even when removals are warranted by the employees' poor performance or misconduct.**

#### **Fact:**

Over 10,000 employees, last year alone, were involuntarily separated from their federal jobs by their supervisors. This figure includes about 3,000 employees who resigned but whose official records indicate that their supervisors had initiated action against them for poor performance, misconduct, or both. These figures do **not** include workers separated because of RIF.

Source: MSPB calculations based on data drawn from OPM's Central Personnel Data File.

### De-layering: Are We Achieving What Was Intended?

Among the National Performance Review's many recommendations was one to increase the average manager's or supervisor's span of control by decreasing the number of supervisory positions. Many federal agencies responded to this suggestion by abolishing a number of supervisory positions. Often this meant that individuals who were formerly in supervisory positions now found themselves in non-supervisory jobs. What is the impact of these changes on individual employees and on the organization as a whole?

To examine this issue, we recently surveyed 1,347 federal employees who had undergone a position change from a supervisory to a nonsupervisory position in the last three years.

*(continued on page 2)*

### Inside this Issue

Employees Criticize Agencies' Handling of Performance Problems. Page 3

Supervisors Give Third-Party Agencies Mixed Reviews. Page 4

News From MSPB's Standing Panels. Page 4

Facts About Hispanics in the Federal Workforce. Page 5

---

## Director's Perspective *(continued from page 1)*

and Paul Volcker, former chairman of the National Commission on the Public Service, expressed the opinion that the quality of the Federal workforce is in decline.

Whether or not this is truly the case, the Board's research tells us that the issue of quality is a complex one, and the answer to whether quality is in decline isn't a simple yes or no. We do know that most federal employees are positive about the quality of the workforce. Results from the Board's most recent Merit Principles Survey, completed last year by over 9,700 people, indicate that two-thirds of federal employees believe that the quality of their coworkers is above average.

However, our data also suggest that if future circumstances were to create a need for the government to do more hiring than it has over the last three years, we might be facing real problems with

regard to workforce quality. Federal supervisors who participated in the 1996 Merit Principles Survey rated the quality of job *applicants* lower than did the supervisors who responded in 1992. At the moment the applicant pool is apparently large enough and good enough to accommodate federal supervisors' hiring needs, in part because they were hiring fewer *employees* in 1996 than they did in 1992. Therefore, despite their views on applicant quality, the supervisors in our 1996 survey reported that they were still able to find enough well qualified people for their vacancies. But imagine a situation—a new federal program, a crisis of some sort—that calls for the government to recruit larger numbers of well qualified people than it has in recent years. With U.S. unemployment levels at or near historic lows and the government's own supervisors already rating applicants lower in quality than they previously have, a shortage of high quality workers is by no means a remote possibility.

What all this suggests for the federal government is a continuing need—even in the midst of downsizing, and especially in a climate of deregulation—to pay special attention to workforce quality and the means by which we achieve it. In making decisions about how to hire, whom to hire, and ways to maintain quality, we need to strive for a careful balance between the costs and benefits of the choices we make. As MSPB Chairman Ben Erdreich recently said, "good merit-based public service sometimes requires doing more than that which is least costly."

In short, workforce quality, whether or not viewed currently as a problem, should always be a concern. And perhaps those times when circumstances least incline us to be concerned about workforce quality are the very times when we need to be most vigilant about these issues.

*John M. Palguta*  
Director, Policy and Evaluation

---

## Cutting Organizational Layers *(continued from page 1)*

Our respondents did not include former supervisors who had *voluntarily* sought a job change to a nonsupervisory position. Instead, they were employees whose supervisory duties had officially been removed from their position titles and descriptions. Given the historical reluctance of large bureaucratic organizations to change the way they do business, we were curious as to whether these former supervisors were still perform-

ing supervisory duties. If agencies are operating in the spirit of the NPR recommendations concerning de-layering organizations, these employees should be performing only those tasks associated with nonsupervisory jobs. When asked about the results of their position change, two-thirds (66 percent) of the respondents said they had actually stopped performing—or performed less—supervisory work. On the other hand, some 34 percent of our survey respon-

dents said that they had not stopped performing supervisory tasks. And even though the majority of the respondents (71 percent) said that the ratio of employees to supervisors in their work units had increased over the past two years, 37 percent of the respondents still considered themselves to be supervisors.

Perhaps more disturbing is the finding that, of those who reported increases in the aver-

age span of a manager's control in their work units, the majority do not see these staffing changes as bringing about desired changes in the performance of individual employees or the work unit as a whole: only one-quarter said that the staffing changes had enabled nonsupervisory employees to make decisions with greater independence, and only 9 percent believed that the changes had improved the performance effectiveness of the work unit overall. (When analyzing these results, it's important to keep in mind that the respondents have experienced involuntary job changes from supervisory to non-supervisory positions, and some may have negative feelings about the changes.)

Thus, these limited data indicate that some progress is being made to de-layer organizations within the federal government, but that the changes have not yet brought about all of the intended results. For a sizable proportion of our sampled employees, a change in supervisory status apparently has not resulted in a change in the duties they perform or the way they view their function in the organization. Nor have survey respondents reported noticeable improvements in individual or organizational performance that have been brought about by these changes. As de-layering and downsizing continue, it remains to be seen whether workplace realities will ultimately match NPR's vision of a streamlined federal workforce creating a more efficient and effective government.

## Employees Criticize Agencies' Handling of Performance Problems

When asked recently about how well their agencies handle performance problems, nearly half of the 9,710 respondents to MSPB's 1996 Merit Principles Survey were negative about their agencies' performance: 44 percent felt their agencies regularly do a poor job of correcting the inadequate performance of their coworkers. Interestingly, there was very high agreement on this issue at all levels of the organization: 44 percent of non-supervisory employees, 43 percent of first-level supervisors, and 43 percent of second-level and higher supervisors agreed that organizations have a major problem in being willing or able to correct inadequate performance.

According to the same survey, just over half (51 percent) of all respondents believe their agencies don't fire people who cannot or will not improve their poor perfor-

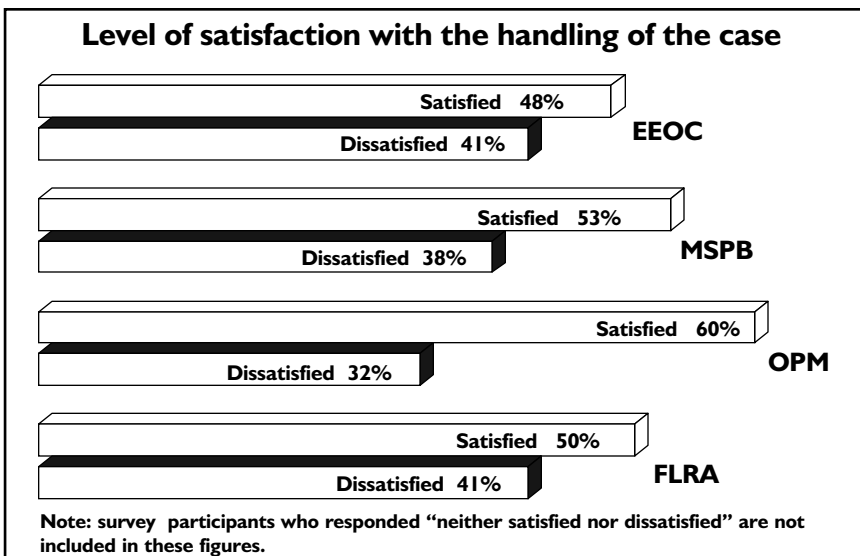
mance. What may seem surprising, though, is the finding that even more *supervisory* personnel felt this way than nonsupervisors. Fifty-one percent of nonsupervisory employees, 59 percent of first-level supervisors, and 59 percent of second-level and higher supervisors believed that their organizations are unsuccessful at separating poor performers. Given that supervisors typically are responsible for addressing employees' performance problems, one might think that they'd have a more positive view. But, as we noted in an earlier MSPB Issue Paper ("Removing Poor Performers in the Federal Service," September 1995), federal supervisors believe that they face many obstacles in trying to deal with poor performers, and that they often are thwarted by other persons or circumstances in their attempts to separate poor performers. Therefore, it is not entirely unexpected that supervisors responding to the Board's current Merit Principles Survey would express negative views about their agencies' track records in separating employees who don't perform.

### ***Please Consult Your Crystal Ball***

... and help us predict future hot issues in HRM. We would like to know what you think are the most critical issues for the future of human resources management in the federal government. Please give us your views (you needn't identify yourself, but we would like to know whether you're a federal employee, an HR professional, an academic, an interested bystander, or whatever) by leaving us a message at (202) 653-8900. Or, you're invited to e-mail us at [pe.contact@mspb.gov](mailto:pe.contact@mspb.gov)

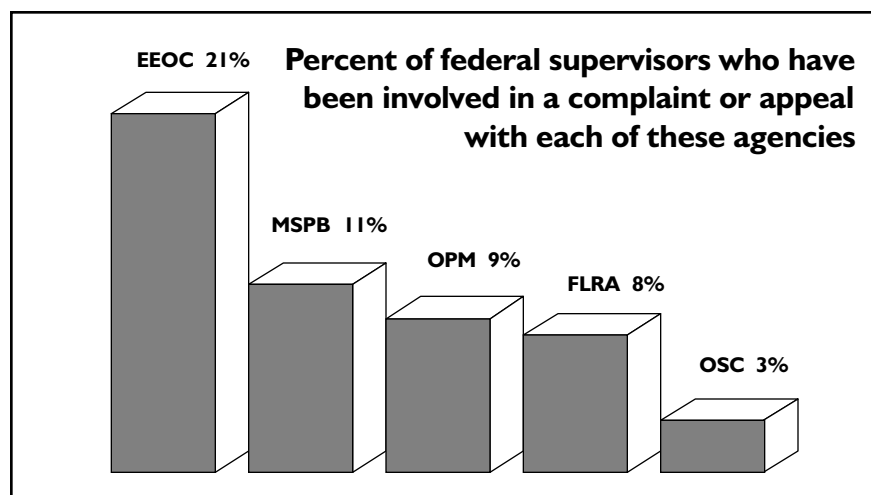
## Supervisors Give Third-Party Agencies Mixed Reviews

Federal employees have a variety of options available to them to seek the redress of their grievances and complaints. Employees who are fired, demoted, or suspended for more than 14 days can appeal the action taken against them to the MSPB. Workers who believe that their jobs are not classified correctly can ask OPM to review their jobs. Employees who think they've been victims of discrimination can complain to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). When there is a dispute involving agreements with the unions that represent federal employees, complaints may be brought to the Federal Labor Relations Authority (FLRA). And employees who believe that they have been the victims of a prohibited personnel practice (including reprisal or threatened reprisal for making disclosures about health and safety dangers, or fraud, waste, or abuse) can seek redress with the Office of the Special Counsel (OSC).



As another part of the Board's periodic Merit Principles Survey, a representative sample of supervisors were asked about their experiences with each of these third-party agencies. As the chart below shows, relatively few federal supervisors have had direct interaction with any of these organizations. About one in five supervisors has been a party to an action involving the EEOC, but only about one in ten have been part of disputes resolved by MSPB, OPM, or FLRA. Even fewer supervisors have been involved in a complaint or appeal filed with the OSC.

The chart above shows how satisfied supervisors were with how their cases were handled by each of the third-party agencies. Results are not shown for OSC because too few supervisors had experience with this agency to constitute a valid sample. Clearly, supervisors' opinions on this subject vary. It should be noted, too, that satisfaction or dissatisfaction of the parties involved in these complaints and appeals may be related to the decision that ultimately was rendered in each case.



## News from MSPB's Standing Panels

In our last *Issues of Merit*, we announced the establishment of three standing panels—one of managers and supervisors, one of HR professionals, and one of federal union representatives—whom we can survey to obtain information on how changes in human resources management are affecting them and their agencies. Although the survey results are not statistically representative of the

*(continued on page 5)*



## Panel News

(continued from page 4)

entire government, the responses do provide some interesting insights into current federal personnel management practices. The articles that follow summarize the results of two of our recent panel surveys. We'll be reporting more of these front-line views in future *Issues of Merit*.

### Supervisors Express Fears About Future HR Duties

In a recent standing panel survey, a number of federal managers and supervisors volunteered their views on what they see as their human resources responsibilities over the next three years. Participants' responses suggest that lack of confidence in their own HR knowledge and concern over increasing workload are common among government supervisors. Many respondents believe they will have more HR responsibility, which will result in their spending more time on personnel work and less on what they see as their "real work"—activi-

ties directly related to mission accomplishment and development of employees. Survey respondents expressed concern that both their HR work and mission-related work will suffer.

Some respondents also suggested that they're being required to shoulder personnel responsibilities not so much because it's an inherently good idea to delegate HR authority to managers and supervisors, but because the government must decrease the size of its HR organizations and there's nobody else to do the work.

A number of the managers and supervisors expressed disinterest in becoming experts in personnel rules and regulations, and some see HR as a paperwork exercise. Typical of respondents' comments were these: "We are now looking at doing more work with no additional assistance, training, or resources" and "More responsibility will fall to managers, and support staffs will diminish—it's the right direction, but [HR offices] should not be cut too much—other-

wise managers will be overwhelmed. Managers want authority to manage their resources, but not be bothered by administrivia."

### How Are Supervisors Held Accountable?

When we asked members of our standing panel of managers and supervisors about how they're held accountable for personnel management activities, and which methods were the most effective, several shared views emerged. Nearly all of the respondents said that discussions with supervisors and their own performance appraisals were used to hold them accountable for HR activities. More than half said that feedback from subordinates also was used. Less than a quarter of respondents said that evaluations and audits were used to hold them accountable, and less than a fifth said that their own desire to do the right thing makes them accountable. A few supervisors cited the union's watchfulness as their impetus towards accountability for HR activities.

Of the methods mentioned, panel members identified discussion with their supervisors as the most effective because of its timeliness and informality, which allow for corrections before a performance rating is given. Interestingly, the managers and supervisors found feedback from their subordinates to be more effective than performance appraisals from their superiors in holding them accountable, because such feedback is viewed as more accurate, reliable, and less biased than formal performance evaluations.

### Facts About Hispanics in the Federal Workforce

■► Hispanics made up 6.0 percent of the federal civil service workforce in September 1996. Hispanics made up 10.5 percent of the workforce of the U.S. and Puerto Rico in 1996, according to OPM.

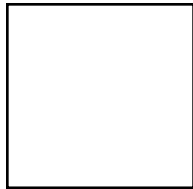
■► While 2.8 percent of all Hispanics in the U.S. live in San Antonio, Texas, 12.6 percent of all Hispanics who work for the federal government work in metropolitan San Antonio.

■► Kelly Air Force Base in San Antonio employs 40 percent of all Hispanics in the Department of the Air Force and 6.4 percent of all the Hispanics in the federal government. Kelly is scheduled for base closure by 2001.

# Issues of Merit

A Publication of the Office of Policy and Evaluation, U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board

U. S. Merit Systems Protection Board  
1120 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20419



## Recent Publications from the Office of Policy and Evaluation

- ☐ Fair and Equitable Treatment: A Progress Report on Minority Employment in the Federal Government
- ☐ The Rule of Three in Federal Hiring: Boon or Bane?
- ☐ Sexual Harassment in the Federal Workplace: Trends, Progress, Continuing Challenges
- ☐ Removing Poor Performers in the Federal Service: An Issue Paper
- ☐ Leadership for Change: Human Resource Development in the Federal Government

## Selected Earlier Reports

- ☐ Temporary Federal Employment: In Search of Flexibility and Fairness (1994)
- ☐ Whistleblowing in the Federal Government: An Update (1993)
- ☐ A Question of Equity: Women and the Glass Ceiling in the Federal Government (1992)
- ☐ Federal First-Line Supervisors: How Good Are They? (1992)

## Current Projects

- ☐ Representation of Hispanics in the Federal Government
- ☐ Federal employees' views of how well their agencies protect the merit principles
- ☐ Dealing with employee performance problems
- ☐ OPM oversight of federal agencies' HRM programs

*For a copy of any Office of Policy and Evaluation publication, contact:*

U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board  
Office of Policy and Evaluation  
1120 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20419

**E-mail:** [pe.contact@mspb.gov](mailto:pe.contact@mspb.gov)  
**Voicemail:** (202) 653-8900  
**V/TDD:** (202) 653-8896  
**Fax:** (202) 653-7211

**MSPB home page:** <http://www.access.gpo.gov/mspb>

"Issues of Merit" provides findings and recommendations drawn from MSPB research on topics and issues relevant to the effective operation of the federal merit systems and the significant actions of the Office of Personnel Management.